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Behind the Scenes With Poe

Mrs. EVELYN C. BURGETT

A Blueprint of "The Raven" as Developed from Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846) and Presented to High School Freshmen.

The magnificent tones of an exquisitely played violin move the ordinary layman proportionately to his understanding of the techniques of that instrument. Like this layman, a student appreciates Poe's "The Raven" in accordance with his understanding of the mechanics of the poem. In order to deepen the students' appreciation of the mechanics of "The Raven," I presented the major thoughts of Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" to my freshman English classes when we studied this poem. Originally, I planned to make this presentation only to an accelerated English class. However, when I perceived the enthusiasm which developed in that class from the study of Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition," I used the thoughts from the essay in modified form for all my classes in conjunction with the study of "The Raven."

When the students came to class, I first attempted to set the stage for the study of the poem. On a midnight in bleak December, the fire in the grate has ceased to be merry, leaping flames. The coals have scattered and are only dying embers casting flickering shadows on the floor. A lonely student sits wearily reading in

Instead of constantly asking "What happened next?" and "How many feet are in this line?" a skillful teacher helps students to read in depth, to understand both background and foreground, to share momentarily in the pangs of creation. Mrs. Burgett, who teaches at Urbana High School, illustrates with a familiar poem.

desultory fashion. He flips the pages idly as he tries in vain to read something to lessen his sorrow. Lenore has died and he is grief-stricken. He sits in a luxuriously appointed room. The curtains are "silken"; there is a "violet velvet cushion." A bust of Pallas adds to the note of classical beauty and serenity in the room. Then as if awakened from a dream, the young man hears a noise as though someone were tapping at his door. The Raven finally alights on the bust of Pallas. The lover, amazed, asks the black bird what his name is. The mood of the questioner changes. At first he is jestingly curious; at length he becomes more serious, and finally his question is a soul-searching one.

Before going "behind the scenes" with my freshmen, I read the poem aloud to them so that they could absorb its melody and could paint some of its imagery in their minds. The rhythm and the music in the poem are the work of an artist. But how did Poe achieve such artistry?

In his "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), Poe himself analyzes his efforts to attain this artistry. After the class had read the poem, I introduced "The Philosophy of Composition," in which Poe explains his method of composing "The Raven." That he intended "The Raven" to be a work of art is evidenced by the careful thinking which he reveals to the world in this essay. "The Philosophy of Composition" is too difficult for freshmen to read by themselves. Accordingly, I had carefully stored the major facts in mind. I then gave the class a digest of these facts in a story-like presentation of the essay combined with the lines of interpretative reading of the poem and some questions based on Poe's analysis. I could sense a quietness in the room and a readiness to listen. The class felt a rapport with Poe's young man, obviously a student. They were fascinated with the logic of the prose. They were genuinely interested in learning why Poe chose a certain detail and discarded another. To the class the fitting together of "The Philosophy of Composition" and "The Raven" was like assembling the pieces of a puzzle. They loved speculating on Poe's reasons for a certain choice and then enjoyed knowing his reason as stated in "The Philosophy of Composition." The obvious logic fascinated them; they could clearly understand, as we went along, what Poe meant when he wrote these words: ". . . The work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision . . . of a mathematical problem."

Poe begins his "The Philosophy of Composition" by stating that authors could write interesting articles about their compositions by giving in detail all the steps leading up to the finish of a

given work. Most authors "shudder" at the very idea of "letting the public take a peep behind the scenes"; they are unwilling to reveal their "elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought," their undeveloped ideas, their matured fancies later discarded as unmanageable, their "cautious selections and rejections"; they do not wish to expose the "painful erasures and interpolations"; they do not wish the public to see the "step-ladders, red paint and the black feathers, which in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary histrio."

But Poe says that he does not object to his readers' going behind the curtains. He even invites those interested to go with him on a tour of his thoughts while he was composing "The Raven." He says that he recalls the progressive steps of this composition. He proposes to show exactly how this poem was put together.

* * *

I took up Poe's problems with the class in the order in which Poe considers them in his "The Philosophy of Composition." His first problem was that of an "effect." The "effect" must be "novel" and "vivid." To achieve a "totality of effect," a reader must be able to read a poem in one single sitting. If two sittings are required, "the affairs of the world interfere" and the thought is broken; hence the totality of effect is destroyed. Prose writings may ignore length, but poetry cannot. A poem is only a poem if it excites the soul by elevating it. Such excitations are brief, and therefore the length of the poem is an important factor. Poe felt that a poem of about one hundred lines would produce his intended effect. I asked the students to look at their books, and they saw that there were one hundred eight lines in "The Raven."

After progressing thus far with my class, I asked if anyone had an idea of what Poe's next step was. Several hands went up, and one student said Poe was probably trying to decide what "effect" he wanted. Poe chose "Beauty" as his chief effect and states that one of the purest pleasures arises from contemplating the beautiful.

Poe's next problem was what "tone" to use to express "Beauty." He felt that time has shown this tone to be sadness. From time immemorial, Beauty if supremely developed causes the sensitive soul to weep.

Then Poe himself recapitulates for the reader: he has determined the length (about one hundred lines), the effect (Beauty), and the tone (sadness). He next had to choose a kind of pivot upon which the whole poem might turn. I told the students that

this pivot was the refrain. Having studied ballads, the students were on familiar ground with the concept of a refrain. I then called for a volunteer to read the refrain, and a student read the one word, "Nevermore."

Poe states that refrains in many poems are monotones "both in sound and in thought." Since Poe was an artist seeking perfection, an ordinary refrain would not satisfy him. Thus the poet decided to retain the monotone of sound but to vary the thought. Because he had decided to repeat the refrain but vary the thought, Poe knew that he must choose a short refrain.

Students were interested in Poe's reasons for selecting the particular word, "Nevermore." He wanted a "sonorous" word, and so he looked for one with the long "o" and the consonant "r." He must choose a word in keeping with the melancholy tone of the poem. "Nevermore" met all of these requirements.

An author could not write a poem and use "Nevermore" as a refrain in haphazard fashion and still have a sensible poem. So Poe had to think of how he would employ this word. He states that he must have a "pretext" for using "Nevermore."

Poe's first difficulty after deciding on the word for the refrain was an interesting one. Originally he had thought of a human's uttering the word, but after consideration he realized that a "non-reasoning creature" should repeat "Nevermore." But such a creature must really be able to speak. I called for a discussion of creatures suitable for performing this task. Several students mentioned a parrot; Poe himself states in his "The Philosophy of Composition" that he also considered this bird. Then the class talked about Poe's reason for not selecting the parrot. Finally one boy stated that perhaps the plumage of a parrot was too bright and gay for this poem. He was following the thought of the poet who chose the Raven because it reminds a reader of bad luck and sorrow.

Poe again recapitulates, and conveniently I made the summary for the class. He has now planned for a poem of about one hundred lines; Beauty is to be expressed by sadness of tone, and a Raven, "the bird of ill omen," is to utter the refrain, "Nevermore." Poe's next problem was to select the topic that is the saddest in all the world. Students realized that Death is the topic. Poe pursued the thought further. When would Death be most poetical? Poe answers by saying that Death is most poetical when connected with Beauty, and thus he chooses the death of a beautiful young woman mourned by her lover.

Again Poe pauses to summarize his thoughts. He must com-

bine the two ideas—a lover's lamenting the loss of his loved one and a Raven's continual repeating "Nevermore." But he must constantly remember that the thought is to be varied, even though the refrain is the never-changing "Nevermore."

The lover asks different questions, but the Raven's answer is always the same, "Nevermore." Thus each question expresses a different thought, but the reply is the inevitable, monotonous "Nevermore."

Poe's questions themselves are ingenious. They rise in importance and intensity like the mighty climax of a symphony. After I had made a comment similar to the one above, the class proceeded to examine the queries made by the lover. I asked a student to read the first one:

"Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's
Plutonian shore!"

As Poe points out in his "The Philosophy of Composition," this question is "commnplace." Anyone might ask a stranger what his name is when first seeing an unknown person. The questions are all sensible and yet are all answered by Poe's chosen "sonorous" refrain, "Nevermore."

The lover's second remark is less ordinary. Poe states that he barely muttered:

"Other friends have flown before:
On the morrow he will leave me, as my hopes have
flown before."

The Raven's answer, "Nevermore," is just as apt as it was the first time the bird spoke the word. Then the young man attempts to analyze the reason for the Raven's constantly saying "Nevermore"; he decides that perhaps this word is the only one the bird knows and that it learned this word from some disaster.

Then Poe's young man drifts into speculation about the bird and its constant trisyllabic reply. Leaning on the "velvet violet lining" of the cushion, the young man reflects that "she" will "press it nevermore."

Suddenly the air seems denser as if an unseen altar boy is swinging a censer. The lover, now almost beside himself, cries out in agony,

"Wretch," I cried, "thy God hath lent thee—by these angels
he hath sent thee
Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore!
Quaff, oh, quaff this kind nepenthe, and forget this lost
Lenore!"

But the Raven's reply is the same doleful reply, "Nevermore." The memory of his sorrow is to stay in the lover's mind.

The young man's questions become more subtle. He has long searched for their solution. Torn between superstition and that despair "which delights in self-torture," the lover presses on. Reason tells him that the bird has simply learned "Nevermore" somewhere, and that it repeats this word by rote. But, like many a grief-stricken soul, the sorrowing lover "experiences a frenzied pleasure in phrasing the questions so as to receive the expected 'Nevermore'." This never-changing answer gives him the "most delicious, because the most intolerable, sorrow." He hugs his grief to his heart and enjoys his own suffering!

Poe then points out that he is building up to the climactic question: Shall this "soul with sorrow laden" ever clasp "in the distant Aidenn" a maiden named Lenore? And there is the horrible finality of the answer, "Nevermore."

Now that Poe has decided upon the questions building up to a climax, his next consideration is how to get the Raven and the lover together. First he thinks of the locale. I told my students that Poe first had one location in mind but discarded it. The pupils enjoyed speculating on Poe's considered location, and several mentioned a woods. This had been Poe's momentary thought—a forest. However, he discarded this idea because an "insulated incident" needs to be confined; a forest is too spacious. Therefore, he chooses a room, and Poe's own words describe the effect he is seeking. The room encloses the incident as a "frame" does a "picture."

And so Poe places the lover in his "chamber"—a chamber sacred to him because all about him are things that remind him of his beloved. Poe furnished the room in splendor. At the beginning of "The Philosophy of Composition" the author states that Beauty is part of poetry.

After the locale is selected, the poet must get the Raven into the room. Poe says that the only way to introduce the bird is through the window. However, he does not have the bird fly in at once; he has the lover hear the flapping of the bird's wings against the shutter and makes the lover think that it is someone "tapping" at the door. Poe states that he has two reasons for thus prolonging the bird's entrance: the delayed appearance increases the reader's curiosity and the tapping may be that of the spirit of his lost Lenore!

I asked the students what kind of night it was and they recalled that it was tempestuous. Poe has chosen a stormy night

for two reasons: the bird, seeking shelter from the night, flies to a lighted window, and the physically serene and quiet room affords a contrast with the stormy outdoors.

Entering the room, the Raven perches on a bust of Pallas. Then I asked the class, "Why do you suppose that Poe has the Raven perch on this bit of statuary?" One boy said that it was probably marble and therefore white and that the Raven was glossy black. Black and white form a striking contrast. The discussion brought out the fact that Poe, as well as many authors of his time, was fond of using contrasts. Then the class discussed Poe's reason for choosing the particular goddess, Pallas. I told the students that her other name was Athena. Some of the students knew that she was the goddess of wisdom and that therefore she was suitable to grace a student's room. Poe explains that he calls her "Pallas" instead of Athena because of the sonorosity of the word.

Wishing to get the class to notice the contrast between Poe's first description of the Raven and that of the latter, I asked for a student to volunteer to read aloud the words in line thirty-seven which describe the manner of the Raven's entering. A student read the prepositional phrase "with many a flirt and flutter." I pointed out that this is almost a ludicrous impression of the Raven. Then I asked someone to read the words in line seventy-one which describe the Raven. He read, "this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt and ominous bird of yore." I pointed out to my class that Poe has presented a striking contrast in these two impressions of the bird. "Flirt and flutter" are the very opposite of "ungainly and ominous." And so Poe is working up to the dénouement or clarification of the plot of the narrative part of the poem.

After these contrasting impressions of the Raven, Poe drops every element of the fantastic for a tone, as he says in "The Philosophy of Composition," of the most "profound seriousness." Poe states that the "lover no longer jests." The tone of his questions has changed. The poet selects direful words to depict the Raven. A student read aloud the description in line seventy-four. The Raven was "a fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core." In this new tone of hushed seriousness, the lover asks if he will ever have respite and forgetfulness (lines eighty-one to eighty-nine), and finally he proceeds to the dénouement in lines ninety-three to ninety-five. The lover's query is demanding. He asks whether he will clasp the "sainted maiden"

in the "distant Aidenn." And, of course, there is the same soul-shattering, monotonous answer, "Nevermore."

So far, as Poe says, everything has been in the realm of the "accountable—of the real." Poe recapitulates: a Raven having learned by rote the single word, "Nevermore," and having escaped from its owner, is driven at midnight to seek shelter from the storm. A student is "occupied" half in poring over a volume and half in dreaming of a beloved Lenore, now dead. When the window is opened, the bird perches on a bust of Pallas out of the immediate reach of the young man. The lover, "amused by the incident and the oddity of the visitor's demeanor," jestingly asks his name. The young man has really expected no reply. However, the reply, "Nevermore," finds immediate echo in the melancholy heart of the student. Again the student is startled as he expresses certain melancholy thoughts and the bird repeats "Nevermore" a second time. Then, as Poe has mentioned before, the student is impelled by "the human thirst for self-torture" to ask questions which will bring him the "most of the luxury of sorrow"; because he anticipates enjoying his own sorrow, he keeps on asking questions. To this point in the poem there has been no overstepping of the limits of the real.

Then Poe explains that a poem without an undercurrent of meaning is "naked and repelling." Such a poem lacks "richness." For this reason Poe states he added the two concluding stanzas. The richness and meaning first appear in line one hundred one.

"Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door."

Poe points out that the words "from out my heart" are the first metaphorical expression in the poem. The reader begins to see Poe's meaning and to regard the Raven as "emblematical" of "mournful and never-ending Remembrance." In line one hundred seven of the poem, the lover states that his soul will never rise "from out that shadow." Thus as Poe has mentioned earlier in his "The Philosophy of Composition," the young man prefers to indulge in the luxury of sorrow. Like many a person, he clasps his grief to his heart instead of making an effort to free himself.

In our earlier study of literary selections of merit, I have tried to teach students to form a more mature philosophy of life. They have to learn to meet grief and to make the necessary rejection of it in order to live a well-adjusted life. Poe's young man, in cherishing and in cultivating his sadness, was living an abnormal life.

To see whether the class understood that the lover preferred

to treasure his grief rather than to cast it aside, I asked the students whether they recalled any instance from our earlier studies of a person's ruthlessly getting rid-of sorrow. Several students mentioned Ulysses. When we had studied his character, we had noted that one of his striking and dominant traits was a refusal to countenance holding grief in one's soul; he absolutely forbade his companions to weep over those eaten by Polyphemus. Ulysses made his companions see that they had to use their will to cast sorrow from their minds. The class saw that Poe's young man does not make the effort.

Although "The Philosophy of Composition," in its entirety, is too difficult for high school freshmen, and although it does express some of Poe's faults—extravagance and omniscience—it does provide an interesting way to introduce literary criticism to students. Since "The Philosophy of Composition" was actually composed after "The Raven," critics feel that perhaps Poe did not compose the poem in the exact manner indicated in "The Philosophy of Composition." However, this prose composition is a splendid analysis of the poem. Judicious pruning of "The Philosophy of Composition" by the teacher makes this essay a valuable tool—a tool to interest students in the poem, to stimulate critical thinking, to foster an understanding of the poem, and to help students develop a more mature philosophy of life.

Poe's frank invitation to witness the inside working of his mind was appealing to students. They were interested in the thoughts that Poe says first came to his mind and that he rejected; they were interested in the reasons for the thoughts finally chosen for "The Raven." Going "behind the scenes" with Poe became a realistic lesson in literature.

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Comments on the Evaluation of Essays

ROBERT R. GARD

Of all the English teacher's tasks, marking essays well is surely the most time-consuming and the most difficult. The very complexity of writing itself makes evaluation a demanding chore for even the competent and experienced teacher. For the beginning teacher—for any teacher suffering from the least bit of self doubt or insecurity (and how many have the confidence to overcome these feelings with equanimity?)—the task becomes a disturbing experience. At best, there is very little real satisfaction to be gained from contemplating a stack of essays (except, perhaps, for a vast sense of relief when the marking is completed)—nothing comparable to the satisfaction gained from a lively class discussion. Nevertheless, if we are to do the job of teaching young people to organize their thoughts and to write even passably well, essay marking will remain an important part of each English teacher's work.

To be able to mark essays well, the teacher must have in his mind a clear idea of the weighting to be given to organization, style, and mechanics. The NCTE's "Ideaform" paper—outlining such pertinent aspects of writing as *Organization, Development, Sincerity of purpose and expression, Sentence structure and punctuation, Paragraphing, Usage, Choice of Words, Spelling, and Penmanship and general appearance*—provides what must be a useful guide for the beginning teacher and a constant reminder for the experienced. Used with care, "Ideaform" paper should do much to insure uniformity of standards for an individual or for a department. Too, the *Illinois English Bulletins* of March and April, 1953, entitled, respectively, "Evaluating Ninth Grade Themes," and "Evaluating Twelfth Grade Themes," offer a rich resource for the guidance of the English teacher in theme evaluation.

Whether he is new or experienced, secure or ill-at-ease, the

How can evaluation be made a teaching device and not just a painful method of arriving at grades? In answering the question Mr. Gard, of Riverside-Brookfield High School, draws thoughtfully upon his experience as a high school and a college teacher of English.

teacher should have a quiet place to work at evaluation, and he should be relatively fresh, for his task requires the most intense concentration. Unfortunately, quiet places are hard to find (study halls and conference rooms seldom qualifying), and one is hardly fresh for "homework" after a seven-hour school day and a committee session or club meeting after school. Miss Grant's "Tired Teachers Cheat Children" in the May, 1958, *Bulletin* makes this point of teacher fatigue quite clear and backs it with informative statistics. Too few schools provide anything like a quiet work-room for teachers to use for evaluating papers, planning, and doing other individual tasks.

Even under ideal circumstances, as William Dusel's report in the October, 1955, *Bulletin* made clear, an efficient teacher requires three or four minutes per page to read, evaluate, and comment upon a student's writing. For a teacher with a "normal" load of 150 students, each essay assignment means something like fifteen to twenty hours of evaluation time (assuming that the length of the essays averages two pages). If this work is done at home, it must be largely taken from time that would be spent in professional improvement or in leisure activities. Naturally, very few teachers care to contemplate the loss of fifteen or twenty hours of time each week. While some schools require an essay each week, in spite of the almost intolerable burden imposed on conscientious English teachers who observe the requirement, most of them seem to be settling for about half as much writing as students probably should do in English classes—an essay every two weeks. Even so, the conscientious teacher will spend eight or ten hours a week at home on theme evaluation alone.

To reduce their burden, many teachers use only symbol marking and may resort to a mere marking of details of spelling, punctuation, and obvious sentence faults, with no mention of organization, style, or effectiveness. Other teachers, unfortunately, manage to avoid themes almost entirely, allowing their students to escape with no more than two or three in each semester. A less obvious method for reducing load is to assign only light personal essays, which are much easier to write and to mark than are serious compositions.

The obvious answer to the load problem is to reduce the total number of students per teacher. Whether this is done by reducing class size or by reducing the number of classes taught makes very little difference as far as theme evaluation is concerned. A reduction in class size by twenty per cent would provide greater opportunity for work with individuals each day, while reducing

load by one class would permit the teacher to spend five more hours per week in preparation and evaluation—and to do so with a smaller number of papers. It is noteworthy that those schools in Illinois which produce the best-prepared students regularly operate with lower student loads than the "norm." I doubt that this is mere coincidence.

Leadership in the matter of reducing total load must come from English teachers themselves. Encouraging signs are the NCTE and IATE resolutions concerning class size and teacher load. We have an ally in the University of Illinois, and we can capitalize on public concern aroused by criticism currently leveled at our schools by the press and by other mass media. In short, we are aware of the conditions necessary to provide literate, capable graduates in our key field—it is part of our responsibility to our students to make these conditions clear to our administrators and to the public. That we are not asking for *less work* should be obvious—we are asking for teaching conditions that will permit us to give the results that the public wants.

In the interim, under present load conditions, it may be that a formal theme assignment every two weeks is an acceptable compromise, assuming that the student does *some* kind of writing each week. The bi-weekly essays should no doubt average 300 to 400 words, with a reasonable balance between shorter and longer papers during the year. Probably, too, it is wise to limit the number of light personal essays to not more than a fourth of the total number. On alternate weeks, essay tests, single paragraphs, one-page commentaries or sketches, précis, and revisions might well fill in the gap—each of these requiring much less time to read and evaluate than would a fully-developed essay.

All papers should be assigned in such a way as to tax the youngster's powers—to make him think *before* he writes. If book reviews are assigned as critical essays rather than mere summaries, then these might well be included among the year's 18 or 20 formal essays. Other argumentative and expository papers should make up the backbone of the program, but creative talent must not be overlooked. Even the most pedestrian of writing forms will permit the creative thinker to seize upon the fresh approach, the opportunity for humor, the chance for satire—and these touches deserve approbation and encouragement. It is unfortunate that the creative student's efforts are sometimes thwarted by unthinking teachers who look primarily for conformity.

Purely aesthetic writing has its place, too, for those who have the gift of wings or the urge to fly. Alternative assignments

can leave the way open for those talented youngsters who would otherwise feel trapped in a mesh of dull and plodding expository prose. (An example of alternative assignments would be, perhaps, to ask students to write a comparative criticism of several short poems by the same author, to write a review of a long poem, or to write two or three sonnets or the equivalent.) The teacher must, however, guard against allowing the spark of creative brilliance to outweigh all considerations of form and accuracy: genius is a gift, but the craft of writing must be learned.

I believe that a good number—perhaps half—of the year's essays should be written as *impromptu*, with the topic or form or both assigned in class on the day of writing. Students should understand why *impromptu* writing is important, should see the carry-over of these pressure situations into college and business conditions. Guided *impromptu* writing can help a student, too, in learning to organize his ideas quickly and to set them down on paper efficiently. *Impromptu* writing forces efficiency. (A purely practical sidelight is the teacher's opportunity to see what each student can do without the chance for outside assistance.)

If a teacher makes effective use of the unit method of teaching, essays are no doubt an integral part of each of his units. If he does not teach in units (and, for high school students, I doubt that there is any particular magic in the unit form of teaching as opposed to traditional methods), he must be sure that his students understand the purpose underlying each of his essay assignments.

Whether essays take the form of reports, critical evaluations, short stories, or brief research papers, they should, I believe, receive especial emphasis in the English course. After all, they are of great value as a study area for the organization and expression of ideas, and writing will be a major means, both in college and in later life, by which the student's ideas are communicated to others. (I suppose speech teachers will rise up in a body to contest this last remark—and probably with good reason, on the face of it—since it would be foolish to deny the great importance of conferences, telephone conversations, and other types of oral expression for the successful adult. However, there is very little oral communication of importance in business or professional endeavor which is not eventually reduced to writing for study or for transmittal to others.)

Once an essay is written, the teacher's evaluative techniques make or break the effectiveness of the assignment. Upon the teacher's marks and comments depends the student's understanding of his strengths and weaknesses. Upon them, also, depends

much of the student's motivation for overcoming his weaknesses and building upon his strengths.

Let us not suppose that the slow student cannot benefit from attention to these broader aspects of his writing effort. Often the "remedial" youngster of low I.Q. and great language difficulty makes marked improvement when he begins to penetrate into the hitherto undiscovered world of logically ordered ideas. As a high school senior, he is far better off if he can state a short, logical series of ideas in accurate sixth-grade language than if he flounders in a maze of inaccurate phrases without much idea of what he is trying to do. Motivation of the reluctant often begins with attention to ideas rather than oft-repeated details of mechanics. It is surprising how much more accurate his writing becomes, once the reluctant one tries to *say* something.

Here, too, lies the approach which keeps the talented youngster's interest alive in the midst of routine writing tasks. If his *ideas* are recognized and receive helpful, pointed suggestions and appreciative comments, he can bear with the task of ironing out his spelling problems or perhaps overcoming his total neglect of punctuation.

The best way to evaluate an essay, I believe, is to sit down with the student and go over it carefully, working out the necessary changes and correcting errors. Miss Margaret Newman expressed this same opinion in her 1955 address at the IATE convention, printed in the *Bulletin* of October, 1956, and Duke University is now employing the method consistently. Unfortunately, the old bugaboo of class load may prevent this technique from being practiced, except on rare occasions.

Since an interview is not usually possible, the teacher must rely on the very thing he is attempting to teach—written communication—to get his ideas and criticisms across to his students. In effect, he must write an essay about the essay (cutting corners, of course) to make clear to each student what errors are present, what may be done about them, what are the strong points of the paper, and how it may be improved.

I have mentioned the symbol system for marking, but I do not favor it for high school students. As any teacher knows who has stopped to examine the results, very few high school students can dig information from a book (particularly, it seems, from a grammar book). Unfortunately, too, the students whose papers contain the most marks are usually those who are least capable of understanding textbook explanations. Symbols, then, leave most students with only the vaguest notion of what is wrong with their

papers. They have three alternatives, really—asking the teacher (which is often impossible), asking someone else (which is hardly fair), or guessing (and this is the well-traveled path of least resistance).

Even if the symbols are not used, the teacher is often tempted to mark only mechanical errors and to concentrate attention upon the sentence level. Such an approach makes for easy marking, and certainly the slower students (and a good many of the others, too) make a great many mechanical errors. The real progress of any student, however, depends upon his ability to develop logical, well-arranged patterns of thought and a clear, effective style that suits the content of his paper. Marking of mechanical errors alone cannot contribute much to this result.

It seems to me that even mechanical errors deserve more than a mere indication of error (excepting, perhaps, spelling errors). Whenever possible, I believe, the teacher should indicate, briefly and clearly, what is wrong and what needs to be done. For example, an extra comma might bring forth the remark "Use comma only when you are sure it is needed." A comment of "Weak" or "Unnecessary" might explain why a "so" is crossed out. Similarly, "Awkward. Revise to establish parallel," (with perhaps an abbreviated illustration) means more than "Diction."

Wordy passages become more obvious to the student if he is given an example of more succinct expression. A dangling modifier is apparent to him if a note "Appears to modify . . ." is added to the usual indication. The indefinite use of "you" makes more sense when the student is cautioned to "Use 'you' only when you have someone definite in mind" or to "Avoid shifting to 'you.'" Lack of verb agreement is clearer when a note indicates "Subject is plural" or "Subject, 'that,' refers to plural word."

Above the sentence level, however, marks begin to take on real importance as a device to improve structure and organization. The teacher who takes time to discover and point out a change in order of ideas which will improve the organization of a paragraph is giving the student positive help toward improvement in thinking. Similarly, an explanatory remark, "Note change in point of view," for an added paragraph break shows the student the reason for the break at that point. A misplaced sentence might receive the comment "Should be in first paragraph—note similarity of ideas." This sort of marking shows the student what he can do, not only to overcome his errors, but also to strengthen his writing.

Beyond the paragraph level, comments which indicate improved organization of major ideas in a paper (especially when they are coupled with an assignment that requires careful arrangement of related thoughts) are of great help in assisting the student to learn to think clearly. By attempting to use logical patterns of thought in his essays and by seeing the improvement brought about by rearrangement of these patterns under the teacher's guidance, he can learn to appreciate the value of taking time to organize his thoughts. Even more important, perhaps, is the fact that he can adopt as part of his way of thinking those thought patterns which are most effective for him. He can learn to discriminate between opinion which is defended with fact and opinion which is defended only with opinion, between the emotional and the reasonable, between the balanced and the slanted.

Finally, then, the general comments on the outside of his folded paper can be a source of motivation for any student. A "C" is much more meaningful and much better received when it bears the comment, "You demonstrate creative ability with your descriptive passages, Nancy, but you must learn to write more accurately to give your ideas a chance for adequate presentation." A "D" for the slow student becomes encouraging when it is accompanied with, "Much improved over earlier work, Bill. Sentences are good—mechanics under better control." Even an "F" is bearable when the student sees "Not a bad start, Steve, but needs to be expanded by adding more details. This is a good outline, but it's only an outline."

With superior students, of course, comments may become longer and deal with problems of style and tone. In any case, comments should strike a positive note whenever possible and should always indicate the way toward improvement.

Naturally, the teacher will vary the sort of remarks he uses to fit the class level of the students with whom he deals. "Indefinite 'you'" may mean nothing to a freshman, but it may be perfectly clear to a junior or senior. Too, the teacher must be satisfied with shorter, less fully developed papers from underclassmen than from juniors and seniors. He will probably spend more time in writing carefully worded comments for a slow student or for a superior student than will be necessary for a normally-motivated average youngster. The slow student will need the motivation and encouragement that extra comment can give—the superior student will need the extra comment to strengthen his already superior work. The slow student may need praise for his one writing virtue—common sense—while the superior student may

need a restraining hand to keep his overwriting from becoming unbearable.

Whatever may be the situation of an English teacher, it is certain that he will be taxed to the utmost of his abilities by the problem of theme evaluation. Written thought is very nearly as complex as the intellect from which it comes. It is a complexity which the teacher will never fully fathom—even in the simplest of his students. The more that he gives of his understanding and skill in the specific marking of essays that come to him, the more he will teach, not merely “grade.”

Best Student Poetry and Prose

Once more, early in 1959, the *Bulletin* will publish some of the best poetry and prose written by Illinois junior high school and senior high school students. This is your invitation to submit selected writing of your students.

Please observe these regulations carefully.

1. Again this year the choices will be made by members of the English departments of Millikin and Normal. Please send *prose* manuscripts to Professor Herbert Hiett, English Department, Illinois State Normal University, Normal, Illinois. Send *poetry* manuscripts to Professor Ruth Maxwell, English Department, James Millikin University, Decatur, Illinois.

2. Typed copy is preferred, but not absolutely essential. Send manuscripts first class. No manuscripts will be returned unless you enclose an addressed envelope of sufficient size and with first class postage affixed.

3. Each teacher is requested to send no more than five pieces of prose or ten poems.

4. It is permissible to send a school publication if you wish. If you do so, it will be helpful if you mark the selections you want considered. If both prose and poetry are included in the same publication, it will be necessary to send one copy to Professor Hiett, another to Professor Maxwell.

5. Do not hesitate to send writing by your seventh, eighth, and ninth graders. The student's year in school will be considered by the judges, so that seventh graders, for instance, will not be competing with twelfth graders. Any writing done in 1958 is admissible.

6. If possible, send the manuscripts no later than December 20. January 10 is the final deadline; no piece received after that date can be considered.

7. At the *end* of each paper, include the necessary identification in exactly this form:

JEANNE JACOBS, tenth grade, Exville High School
George Anderson, teacher

8. Before mailing, check with each student to be sure the work is original. Enclose with the manuscripts a statement to this effect: To the best of my knowledge the enclosed manuscripts were written by the students whose names they bear.



